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Special Collections Cataloging at a Crossroads: A Survey of ARL Libraries

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Facing shifting organizational cultures, technological innovations, and the growth of digital information, administrators must consider how best to utilize the resources and staff devoted to cataloging special collections. A survey of special collections cataloging among Association of Research Libraries member institutions showed variation in organization, staffing, and workflow. Cooperation and flexibility are necessary for success.

The process of cataloging special collections material in research libraries is at a crossroads, facing changes caused by technology and organizational culture. Long considered somewhat peripheral, special collections have moved into the mainstream, gaining recognition as integral parts of research library collections. At the same time, cataloging has changed in response to restructuring and technological advances. Although for many years select rare books were acquired, processed, stored, and serviced in entirely different ways than the rest of a research library's collection, more libraries now view their increasingly comprehensive special collections as an essential part of their mission, considering how best to utilize the resources and staff devoted to them within the larger institutional context. The growth of digital information in collections has also created common ground among catalogers working on all types of materials, regardless of departmental boundaries.

If managers and administrators of college and university libraries were ever content with large backlogs of unprocessed special collections, that time is past. Among Association of Research Libraries members in particular, interest in eliminating backlogs and providing intellectual access to digital and other nontraditional formats within special collections is high. Five areas of concern in a recent survey of ARL libraries include the following: whether "adequate intellectual access [is] being provided for special collections materials" and whether "staff levels and available skills [are] appropriate to support the growing size and scope of special collections."¹ These concerns were echoed in the ARL Board of Directors' document "Research Libraries and the Commitment to Special Collections," which urges, among other action items, adequate staffing and "following established guidelines for what constitutes adequate access."² Frequent discussions in informal settings among colleagues and on the electronic discussion list Exlibris suggest that this is a timely topic as libraries examine their organizational structure for efficiencies and improvements. The challenges for those engaged in providing access to special collections are many, highlighting the importance of special collections cataloging in the current library environment.

In this project, the process of cataloging special collections among ARL member libraries was examined, underscoring the changing nature of cataloging and the emerging significance of special collections in research libraries. This survey examines the organizational structure of special collections cataloging, as well as the number and type of staff devoted to the endeavor.

Although this survey revealed no clearly dominant trends in organization, staffing, or workflow, a commitment to providing access to special collections was evident. Comments and explanations given by managers and practitioners offer tantalizing glimpses of a present and future shaped by obstacles such as shrinking resources and increased demand.

Literature Review

Very little research has focused specifically on the organization of special collections cataloging. The staffing of cataloging in libraries is a perennial topic, especially as it relates to the expanding roles of paraprofessionals, outsourcing of services, technological changes, and other trends. The unique position of special collections catalogers, however, appears to have been explored only in a limited way.

One of the few articles to examine the administration of cataloging from a special collections perspective is Suzy Taraba's treatment of the topic.³ Although writing in the early 1990s, Taraba was aware of controversies regarding backlogs, costs of cataloging, and changing technology, as well as trends in access to materials. She responded both as an administrator and a special collections cataloger. "Whatever perfectly understandable reasons there may be for why we have a backlog, these reasons cannot in good conscience be used to maintain backlogs."⁴ Providing special collections examples for common cataloging realities, she calls on catalogers themselves to develop creative strategies to solve problems. "Is it better to catalog one book in complete and elegant detail, or to make five books adequately accessible?"⁵ Common to all catalogers, this dilemma is even more distressing for a special collections culture that has expected a high level of scholarship and bibliographic detail in its cataloging and has thereby contributed to unfortunate backlogs.

Ellen Crosby examined both traditional and emerging ways of providing access to special collections material in her predictions for technical services in twenty-first century special collections.⁶ Her definition of "technical services" included tasks such as preparing finding aids, running online catalogs, and creating library Web sites, and she offered a broad definition of "special collections libraries" that incorporated historical societies, university and state archives, and rare book collections. While referring to cataloging as the "heart" of technical services, she also examines new standards and initiatives such as Encoded Archival Description and Dublin Core metadata for Internet resources. In discussing staffing such operations for the future, she asserts,

All staff members will need to have computer skills and history skills, but in addition they will also need professional education with a solid grounding in principles . . . Special collections libraries—by their very nature unique—will require trained catalogers to prepare local records. Cross-departmental and cross-disciplinary cooperation will become more important.⁷

Several trends identified by earlier studies, which also emerged in this present study, appear to be better documented than the process of special collections cataloging as a whole. For example, the benefits of a closer collaboration between special collections curatorial staff and catalogers were outlined by Elaine Beckley Bradshaw and Stephen C. Wagner.⁸ They speak of an "alliance"

necessary “for providing full access to special collections materials in an environment that is changing rapidly and perhaps insensitive to standards and practices of special collections librarianship.”⁹

Unlike Taraba, who sees similarities in the challenges of cataloging special collections materials with cataloging in general, the authors argue that many trends common in the cataloging world, including outsourcing of cataloging and the use of minimal records, are inappropriate for special collections. They also argue that evolving technologies have failed to deliver promised effectiveness, particularly in the retrospective conversion of special collections catalogs.¹⁰ The only comment they make on organization per se is to suggest placing “the rare book cataloger within special collections” to foster cooperation and communication.¹¹ They call for close collaboration between curator and cataloger in making crucial decisions about how to catalog, what should be cataloged, and with what priority. Echoes of their arguments can be heard in many of the responses to the present survey, particularly those from institutions where special collections and cataloging staff cooperate closely or share reporting lines.

In order to determine if size of collection, existence of backlogs, number of rare book catalogers, and reporting structure correlated to adoption of the Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books core standard for bibliographic records, M. Winslow Lundy surveyed a group of heads of cataloging, heads of special collections, and special collections catalogers at ARL libraries, along with other targeted groups.¹² In thirty-seven responses, she found a range of staffing for catalogers between 0.25 FTE to 9 FTE, although only a small number of institutions have more than one FTE rare book cataloger. Regarding administrative structure, she found that a slightly higher number of institutions have rare book catalogers report to cataloging or technical services units (n = 19) than to special collections departments (n = 12), while six institutions reported catalogers with split reporting lines.

Staffing questions also formed a small portion of a survey of retrospective conversion projects, conducted by the Association of College and Research Libraries/ American Library Association’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Section’s Bibliographic Standards committee in 1998.¹³ The results demonstrated that catalogers work in a variety of organizational environments, with diverse systems and assorted local practices. Although the need for retrospective conversion of special collections materials is decreasing over time, conversion of catalogs and the maintenance that accompanies these projects were still factors in some of the responses to the present survey. Rare books and special collections records, in particular, may require additional maintenance long after the project is officially complete. In addition, the RBMS survey found that most respondents had fewer than five catalogers performing rare or special collections cataloging, and that they were designated for this work by title and/or position description.

The year 1998 also saw the compilation of large-scale survey on special collections in ARL libraries.¹⁴ Although this survey did not directly address questions of staffing levels, it was clear that some of the problems encountered in the present survey, such as the varying administrative structures for special collections, were also a factor in the earlier ARL responses. This survey, and subsequent work by the ARL Special Collections Task Force (such as the recent “Exposing Hidden Collections” working conference in Washington, DC), illustrates commitment to the problems of intellectual access to special collections and the complexity of organizations within the ARL.

Of course, the function of cataloging special collections materials cannot be separated from the cataloging function in general. For this reason, it is necessary to scan the voluminous literature on the organization of cataloging units. This literature is interesting primarily as it highlights similarities among institutions: staffing shortages, pressures for resources, and an atmosphere of constant change.

Only a few case studies offer glimpses related to special collections cataloging. Claire-Lise Benaud, Elizabeth N. Steinhagen, and Sharon A. Moynahan, in their case study of a point-based evaluation system for catalogers at the University of New Mexico, discuss their response to departmental downsizing through attrition and concerns about being marginal-ized.¹⁵ Although no mention is made of catalogers working exclusively with special collections, the flexibility brought about by the new arrangement and by technological advances did allow catalogers to work on-site with collections, a desirable arrangement for handling fragile or cumbersome library materials and one that is particularly common in special collections.¹⁶

In another case study, Barbara I. Dewey identified categories of materials that were not included in a new staffing model because of their “unique nature,” including several non-Roman languages and video recordings.¹⁷ Dewey did not mention special collections among these unique types of materials, but in the reorganization Dewey chronicles, a general cataloger “was reassigned 50% FTE to Special Collections to assist in archives processing work and other professional activities,”¹⁸ indicating that transferring staff between general and special collections cataloging functions was possible.

Although case studies examining cataloging are numerous, recent articles discussing reorganization and administration of cataloging departments are likely out of date, given the continual nature of change in libraries. In addition, the present survey signaled no clear trends in naming or reporting that would suggest parallels to trends in cataloging organization as a whole, and so the effectiveness of comparison to other studies is limited.

Methodology

Academic ARL institutions were chosen as the sample because these tend to be large libraries with active special collections. In addition, ARL libraries are often at the forefront of organizational change and development and are inherently complex organizations with a wide variety of staff duties, classification levels, and assignments. Since patterns of organization vary widely in other parts of the world, focusing on ARL libraries also allowed a uniquely North American orientation.

Surveys were distributed to 114 of the 124 ARL members. National libraries, public libraries, and nonlibrary member organizations (such as the Center for Research Libraries) were excluded since they have very different staffing patterns, different missions, and different responsibilities than do colleges and universities.

Identifying the best person to answer a series of questions about special collections cataloging was the first challenge. Using the libraries' Web pages, the first objective was identifying a supervisor of special collections cataloging or a designated special collections cataloger. Otherwise, the head of cataloging or similarly named department was contacted. As a last resort, administrators of technical services were contacted. Initial e-mails asked the recipient to forward

the survey information if she or he was not the best person to respond, and many did so. Organizational charts, when present, were especially helpful in deciphering the relationships among administrative units.

At large universities with prominent special collections libraries, the identified contact was someone in that specific library, who usually mentioned the existence of other, smaller special collections repositories. Most common, it appears, is for law libraries, music libraries, or other subject-based libraries to have smaller special collections, which are cataloged and processed by staff in those locations.

The predominant form of response was Zoomerang, a Web-based survey service.¹⁹ The required format for Zoomerang surveys dictated breaking out multipart questions into individual questions, resulting in a higher number of questions than anticipated. Only three people reported problems answering the survey due to its length or complexity. Apparently more had difficulties though as six surveys were returned with no responses. Several respondents requested a copy of the survey as an e-mail attachment in order to consult with others in their organization or to assemble information from multiple sources. This word-processed version appears in Appendix A. Most responses were received within a few weeks of initial distribution, even when the survey was forwarded to another person at an institution. Follow up e-mails were sent to non-respondents, though to little effect.

Results

The responses demonstrated no clear trends in organizational structure, staffing, or workflow.

Seventy-six full responses were completed using Zoomerang. In addition, two responses were received via e-mail, for a total of seventy-eight respondents out of a possible 114, or 68 percent.²⁰ Responding institutions represented a mixture of colleges and universities, including public and private institutions of various sizes. Due to ARL's geographic diversity, most U.S. states and several Canadian provinces were represented in the sample.

Indeed, more interesting than the numbers were the comments and explanations given by expert practitioners and managers on the forefront of cataloging special collections, which illustrate concern for responsible management of collections. At the same time, these comments must be considered in their individual institutional context.

Organizational Structure (Questions 2–5)

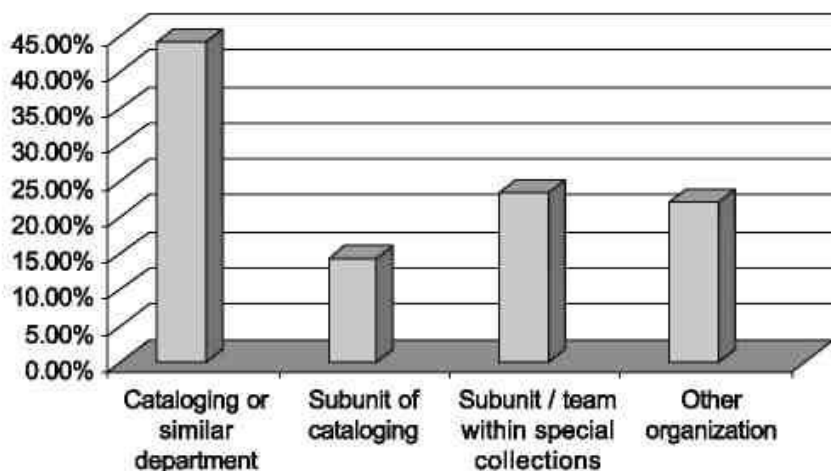
Slightly over 44 percent ($n = 34$) of respondents reported that staff responsible for cataloging special collections material in their institution report to a "cataloging department" or equivalent unit. About 14 percent of institutions ($n = 11$) have a team or subunit within the cataloging unit that is responsible solely for special collections. Approximately 23 percent ($n = 18$) report to special collections administratively, while another 22 percent ($n = 17$) had some other type of arrangement. These figures are comparable with Lundy's findings on her smaller sample (Fig. 1).

The "other" category is particularly illuminating, showing the kinds of innovative scenarios used to accomplish cataloging of special collections. One institution has a distinct department within technical services wholly devoted to special collections. Several institutions reported split types

of staffing. For example, one institution reported that some staff within special collections work on cataloging along with other job duties (estimated at less than 30 percent of their time), while staff within the cataloging department also are assigned special collections cataloging work. In another library, one special collections staff member is trained to complete Library of Congress copy, while the library's principal cataloger catalogs all other special collections material. At one institution, some special collections material that is not seen as particularly "rare" is cataloged by a central technical services group from the library, while dedicated staff in special collections are assigned to other, less typical, collections.

The relationship between archives and special collections is a complicated one in many ARL libraries. Eight individuals responded that archives were separate from the libraries, indicating archives are not cataloged at all. Even in those universities and colleges where archival collections are cataloged, the workflow requires cooperation. In one institution, archives and special collections staff create finding aids and a bibliographic record for RLIN, while staff from the cataloging unit advise them on coding then create an OCLC record for the same collection. In another library, a specialist dedicated to archival technical services catalogs archives and manuscripts using both RLIN and OCLC. Review of records by cataloging staff (presumably more knowledgeable about MARC coding and systems requirements) was mentioned by several respondents. Special collections cataloging staff at one institution create catalog records for selected archival collections based on finding aids provided by processing staff in other special collections or archives units.

Figure 1
Administrative Structure for Special Collections Cataloging



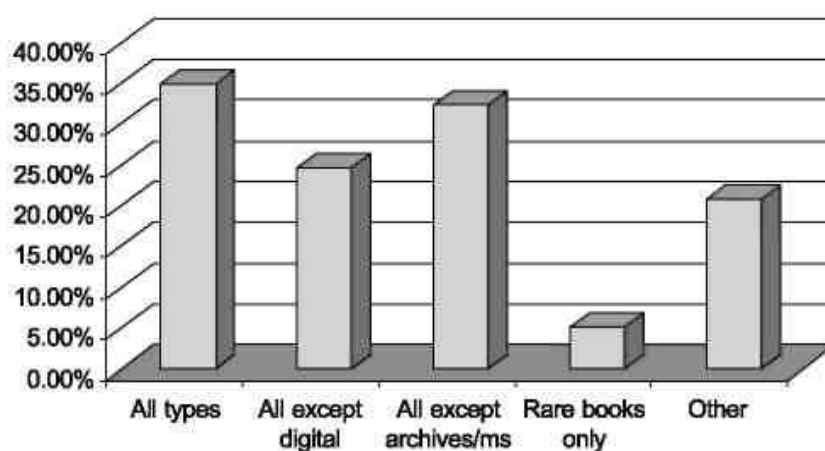
Particularly in larger library systems, divisions between different special collections can be seen. Three individuals explained that there were other special collections libraries at their universities, with different types of staffing. For "flagship" special collections libraries closely identified with their university, there may be separate staffing plans for manuscripts and books. Smaller institutions appear to be much less specialized in their cataloging roles (Fig. 2).

Describing what types of materials are cataloged, there was a division among institutions where special collections catalogers were responsible for all special collections material, including

digital items (n = 27; 35 percent); those who cataloged all special collections material except digital items (n = 19; 24.8 percent); and those who cataloged all special collections material except archives and/ or manuscripts (n = 25; 32 percent). This third category is understandable given the high number of institutions that reported a separate administrative structure for university archives or other archival collections. Some institutions answered that more than one category of materials applied.

Some general tendencies emerged in descriptions of “other” scenarios. Sixteen respondents reported special collections serials were cataloged by a serials unit or other serials specialists, and fifteen reported manuscripts were cataloged in special collections (regardless of where other special collections cataloging was performed). Maps, audiovisual formats, theses, and graphics were also mentioned as materials that were cataloged by staff in other parts of the libraries. Language expertise was also sometimes sought from outside the unit, either from others in an institution’s library system or from cataloging vendors.

Figure 2
Types of Special Collections Material Cataloged



A very small number of respondents (n = 4) stated that their “special collections cataloging” staff was only responsible for cataloging rare books. This tiny fraction illustrates the changing nature of special collections. As such collections increasingly extend beyond the realm of traditional rare books, ARL libraries are responding by providing access to a more diverse set of collection formats.

Staffing Levels (Questions 6–13)

In constructing the survey, sufficient flexibility to accommodate many types of organizational structures was a goal, although respondents did not hesitate to annotate their answers when necessary. In many institutions, special collections are not the only responsibility assigned to a cataloger or group of catalogers (see question 2); in these cases, respondents had to estimate what percentage of a total staff devoted to cataloging were assigned, on average, to special collections materials. A final factor that complicates the results was the author’s desire to limit the number of

questions in the survey. Since the Zoomerang interface required separate questions for each numerical range of responses, a limited number of possible responses was provided. It was clear that many people simply left questions blank that did not apply to their institution rather than pick the lowest (<1 FTE) category. It is also not clear when “<1 FTE” meant that a person was assigned part time to work on a task and when it meant that no-one was assigned this task in the given category. Despite these shortcomings in the survey design, it is possible to make some summary statements about staffing in ARL libraries (Fig. 3).

Approximately 63 percent (n = 49) of libraries reported fewer than one FTE manager or administrator for special collections cataloging. This is not surprising given that so many institutions administer special collections cataloging along with another department or split the duties of a manager between special collections cataloging and another function. A much smaller number have a full-time manager dedicated to special collections cataloging (n = 15), while only a small fraction of libraries have more than one FTE so assigned (n = 3).

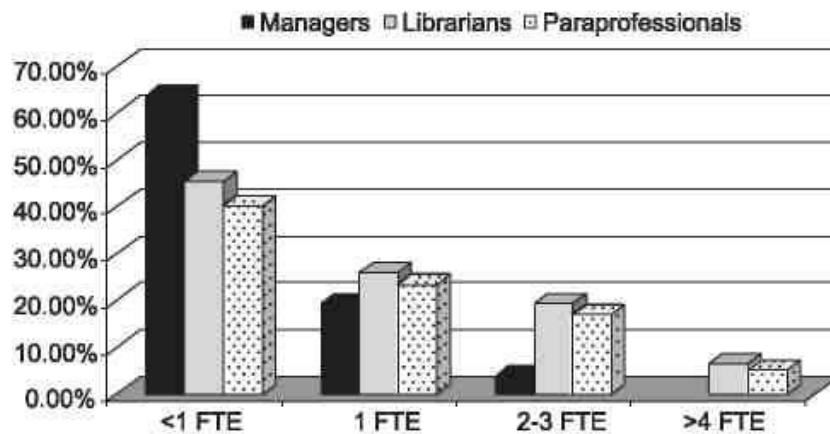
“...over 45% [of responding librarians] reported less than one FTE [professional librarians assigned to special collections cataloging].”

As for professional librarians assigned to special collections cataloging, over 45 percent (n = 35) reported less than one FTE. Again, this seems to be because many institutions have a senior cataloger responsible for special collections and other types of cataloging, such as non-book formats, for the library system. Nearly 26 percent (n = 20) have one dedicated cataloging librarian; 19 percent (n = 15) have between two and three FTE. Only five institutions reported more than three FTE librarian catalogers.

Another category of staff, “professional staff,” was included in the survey and defined as not requiring an MLS degree. This was an attempt to include archivists, information professionals, or other non-librarians who would be involved in providing bibliographic access. It was clear though that ARL libraries either do not make much use of this type of professional in cataloging special collections or do not assign these people to the same functional units as catalogers. Because of the high number of respondents who left this question blank, the results cannot be considered valid. Only fourteen institutions reported one or more FTE professional staff assigned to special collections cataloging activities.

A high degree of similarity was seen across institutions in assignment of paraprofessional staff to catalog special collections. Over 40 percent of institutions (n = 31) reported having less than one FTE assigned; 23 percent (n = 18) have one FTE; and nearly 17 percent (n = 13) have between two and three FTE paraprofessionals. A small number (n = 4) reported between four and five FTE work paraprofessionals catalog special collections. The personnel changes discussed later in the survey further illuminate these numbers, particularly in the context of changing responsibilities for paraprofessionals.

Figure 3
Staffing



The survey also asked about assignment of student assistants to special collections cataloging. It was clear that many respondents simply left this section blank rather than indicate less than one FTE assigned. Over 46 percent (n = 36) of those who answered reported less than one FTE student. All other responses together (n = 10; 13 percent) answered between one and three FTE students assigned to special collections cataloging tasks. As demonstrated in some institutions, student assistants can make a valuable contribution in providing access to materials, performing tasks ranging from marking and sorting books to creating bibliographic records. It is up to managers and administrators to find creative ways to do this, looking beyond the traditional divide between “regular” and special collections cataloging. Special collections in academic libraries have long relied on student assistants for paging of materials and patron assistance; there is no reason why similar attention cannot be given to cataloging tasks.

The questions designed to determine levels of volunteer or other staffing were equally unclear and would require follow-up to determine what use managers are actually making of volunteers or other types of staff in special collections cataloging.

Comparing staffing devoted to special collections cataloging to the entirety of cataloging staff, over 96 percent (n = 74) of respondents reported a special collections cataloging staff total less than one-quarter the institution’s complete cataloging staff. This was predictable since special collections comprise a small percentage of libraries’ collections and have tended to be the responsibility of a limited number of staff. (This specialization extends to collection development and reference, which often are the work of a single “special collections librarian” rather than shared among other professionals.) As attempts are made to make new types of collections usable, however, administrators may need to rethink the assignment of staff. Processing of archival collections and creation of metadata for digital surrogates, databases, and finding aids are already placing challenges on previously book-centered cataloging staff, even when the operation is adequately staffed.

Workflow Assignment (Questions 14 and 15)

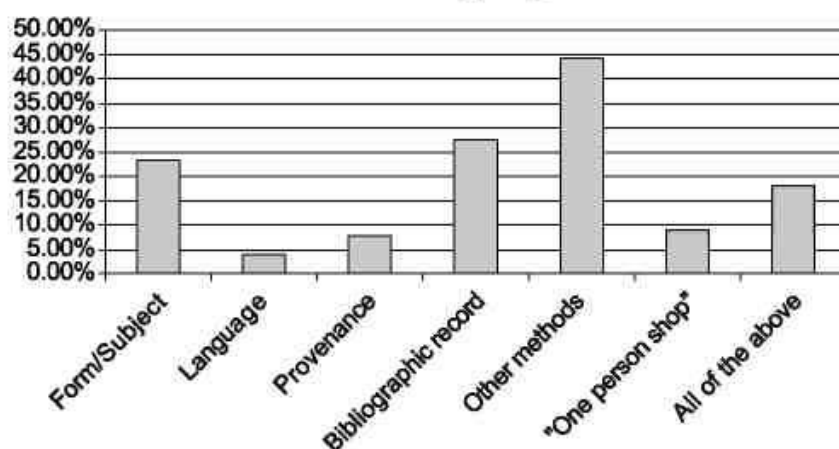
There was very little consistency among institutions in how work is assigned to specific

catalogers. The survey posited four possible scenarios, based on traditional ways of sorting cataloging workflows, and predicated on special training being given to different levels of staff. Some respondents answered that more than one or even all of these criteria were used. Format or subject of the material was credited in 23 percent ($n = 18$), while 27 percent ($n = 21$) of institutions assigned material based on the existence or completeness of bibliographic records. Only 4 percent ($n = 3$) responded that language of material was the sole factor for assignment to catalogers, and slightly more than 7 percent ($n = 6$) credited provenance of the material, such as a specific collection being assigned to a single cataloger. It is clear that language and provenance most often constitute part of a larger set of factors governing assignment of work to specific catalogers (Fig. 4).

In more than 18 percent of institutions ($n = 14$), all these methods were used to some degree. Even more interesting, in more than 9 percent of institutions ($n = 7$), one individual is responsible for all special collections material cataloged so there is no distribution of workflow. The prevalence of these “one person shops” suggests that in many cases, special collections are cataloged by people with broad cataloging knowledge and high expectations for their independence and self-direction, compared to colleagues with format- or language-based assignments. It would be interesting to examine what kinds of support are available to these lone catalogers at their institutions.

Several different types of scenarios were included in the “other” category (a surprisingly large 44 percent; $n = 34$). These range from new collections being assigned to a specific cataloger while the entire group works on a backlog to a workflow augmented by grant projects staff with specific, time-bound responsibilities. Three institutions mentioned that different means of assigning work were used for librarians than for paraprofessionals.

Figure 4
Method of Assigning Work



In some institutions, catalogers appear to have a great deal of flexibility in choosing how to manage their time. One cataloger reported using personal judgment and knowledge of reference requests to select cataloging work, as well as attempting to catalog material from a backlog on a constant basis. Another institution reported that a cataloger tends to work on “chunks” of a

collection with similar subjects, languages, or genres in order to be more efficient. In another institution, a paraprofessional performs triage for the collection, passing more complicated material to a professional cataloger and also prioritizing a significant archival backlog.

Particularly in libraries where cataloging of special collections is done by staff from a larger cataloging unit, special collections workflow may be performed “as needed,” with temporary or permanent assignments. It was not always clear who determined what “as needed” means. No doubt the competition for limited resources exists in this arrangement as in others. One respondent asserted that none of the survey questions applied to that institution and explained that they did not consider special collections cataloging so special that it needed to be “restricted to a select few catalogers.” This may indicate either the successful mainstreaming of special collections or a lack of commitment to the unique requirements of the material. This distinction is a question for those charged with distributing resources for cataloging across libraries.

Recent or Upcoming Changes and Comments (Questions 16 and 17)

Not surprisingly, given the organizational complexity of ARL libraries, 48 percent (n = 37) of respondents reported recent or upcoming changes in the administrative structure affecting special collections cataloging. Since organizational change is so institution specific, “recent” and “upcoming” were not defined, although most respondents seemed to include changes within the last five years and plans for change within the next three or four years. Personnel changes were the most commonly articulated, with over 28 percent (n = 22) mentioning changes in personnel, including numbers of staff, level of classification, or reorganization. At the risk of oversimplifying the complexity of the staffing changes, it appears that in six cases, staff were administratively moved from a cataloging or technical service unit into a special collections reporting line; while in one case, staff were moved from special collections to a centralized cataloging unit.

More than 10 percent of respondents (n = 8) spoke of recently increased cooperation among library units, whether related to formal administrative changes or not. This cooperation took many forms, including catalogers attending special collections staff meetings and having some curatorial responsibilities; technical services staff moving temporarily to special collections to work on backlogs; or the assignment of a cataloger to coordinate special collections cataloging via training, evaluation, and liaison activities. In one library, the increase in digitization has required cooperation among special collections and technical services personnel in setting local standards.

Several respondents answered that work is assigned based on priorities established by reference requests or that material is constantly being pulled from a backlog. In such cases, planning for the best use of resources is complicated by the unpredictability of the material encountered. Special collections cataloging may require use of additional descriptive standards beyond Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and familiarity with other formats, as well as knowledge of the history of printing and publication. Taraba refers to special collections cataloging as “complicated work,”²¹ and Bradshaw and Wagner even assert “cataloging special collections materials simply demands more time and effort to do well than other types of cataloging.”²² Nonetheless, problems in training cataloging staff for special collections may be shared with cataloging colleagues generally. One respondent remarked on the difficulty of finding qualified staff to handle foreign languages: “Language expertise is something that is becoming more scarce (as are professional

catalogers).”

Some changes appear to have been made not through planning but because of serendipity. Vacant positions prompted some institutions to review duties, and personnel were assigned more responsibilities for special collections. In one institution, a recently appointed staff member has expressed an interest in special collections cataloging, suggesting that activity will increase due to this interest rather than a programmatic shift.

In other institutions, new administration brought a deliberate focus to previously uncataloged backlogs. One library with a small special collections reported that under a prior special collections leader, no monographic cataloging of special collections was completed. Retrospective cataloging is now underway for this collection and will continue. Another institution had cataloged little of their special collections in the recent past, as the professional librarian was not familiar with special collections. A paraprofessional staff member hired in 2000 now catalogs most books. In total, over 6 percent of respondents ($n = 5$) mentioned backlogs or retrospective conversion in some way, suggesting they still continue to pose challenges in providing access to special collections. Again, this number would likely be higher if more responses included information on archival and manuscript collections, a problem of much larger volume in ARL institutions.

The current downturn in the economy and its implications for university library budgets did not go unremarked. Budget problems were revealed, either directly or indirectly, in several statements about positions left unfilled or the failure to replace experienced staff. At the same time, several institutions reported upgrading staff, particularly paraprofessionals, to handle more special collections material. In one case, however, this upgrade included the addition of more noncataloging duties as well. One fortunate institution reported adding staff across technical services over the past four years, with the net effect of increasing staff resources for cataloging special collections. In one institution, the retirement of a special collections cataloging expert, coupled with increased special collections purchases due to an endowment, drove the decision to rehire the retired cataloger on contract basis while other catalogers are trained in cataloging special collections.

It has been argued that “libraries are increasingly finding themselves in the position of having to hire temporary employees for a variety of reasons.”²³ Only one institution mentioned a grant-funded rare book cataloger dedicated to a special project, although there is reason to suspect that more work is being done in archives and special collections through grant-funded archival processors. The apparent disconnect between libraries and archives would conceal these staffing decisions.

In sum, changes in personnel devoted to special collections cataloging seem to fall into two categories. One is rather regrettable and appears to parallel the numerical decline of the profession of cataloging in general, as paraprofessional staff perform more duties and bear more of the burden of providing access to collections. In special collections, they may also bear increasing responsibilities for tasks beyond cataloging, such as public service or curating collections. The other trend, a much more encouraging one, indicates increased cooperation and collaboration in response to challenges that affect the entire enterprise.

Although the survey did not explicitly ask about technological changes driving special

collections cataloging work, several respondents addressed such activities as creation of EAD finding aids, use of XML, or the need to develop a process for cataloging digital surrogates of special collections items. Underscoring the theme of increased cooperation between technical service and special collections, one respondent spoke of digital collections and the need for staff from all areas (including digital projects staff) to work together to develop standards for mapping Dublin core metadata to MARC.

EAD was specifically mentioned by only two respondents, but given the apparent divide in many institutions between cataloging and archives, this is not surprising. One institution reported a temporary assignment of an archivist as an EAD specialist, working in collaboration with special collections cataloging, in an attempt to mainstream this workflow. In another institution, merging EAD finding aid creation with cataloging is under consideration. Clearly, collaboration between technical services and archives in providing access to collection information has not yet become as common as other types of collaboration.

The looming question of how to handle digital items was also specifically mentioned by three respondents. Three more institutions mentioned that digital items were currently cataloged by a separate unit within the library and were not part of the special collections workflow. This indicates that institutions are responding differently and that managers or administrators assess challenges differently, depending on administrative structures.

Conclusion

As expected, academic ARL libraries proved to be complex and changing organizations, facing challenges that include reduced staffing, the need to eliminate backlogs, and the need for increased cooperation to take advantage of differing expertise. The implications for managing these changes are many. Like all areas of library operation, special collections cataloging requires adequate, appropriately trained staff in order to be successful. Dedicated staffing appears to alleviate somewhat problems caused by competition for resources. Although different organizational structures appear to work well in different environments, cooperation and flexibility are key to success.

At the same time, a shifting organizational culture supports reallocation of resources to eliminate backlogs and has reached a degree of consensus that “some access is better than none.”²⁴ While there is so far no agreement about how this access can be provided, it is encouraging that leaders in the field have undertaken creative solutions to problems with the support of the special collections community.

Not surprisingly, the 1998 ARL report suggests cataloging of special collections must be seen as part of the entire process of collections management. Increasing public scrutiny of higher education suggests that it is irresponsible to continue to acquire (either through gifts or purchase) materials that will not be made intellectually accessible. Further, the lack of patron understanding for long-standing distinctions between rare books and rare serials and between print and nonprint formats makes these distinctions harder to justify. As special collections grow beyond rare book collections and encompass more formats, languages, and subjects, innovative responses will need to be made to providing access, particularly for those used to working only with one type of metadata.

As ARL libraries struggle to maintain quality standards and provide adequate services in all areas of operation, special collections cataloging must not be overlooked. Facing the crossroads of special collections cataloging created by technology and organizational trends, library administrators must consider all their options before making choices about allocating resources. Once those choices are made, cooperation, collaboration, and an understanding of the shared realities of special collections cataloging across institutions can help make the best of any situation.

Appendix A. Survey Instrument Special Collections Cataloging in ARL Libraries

For the purposes of this survey, “special collections” includes rare books, manuscripts, archives, and other formats held in special collections repositories. “Cataloging” refers specifically to the creation of bibliographic records, not to the creation of finding aids, databases, or other forms of access. Since cataloging may take place in many different areas or collections, please answer to the best of your ability for your entire institution, or pass this survey on to a colleague who can provide this information. If you have questions about this survey while completing it, please contact Beth M. Russell at (614)247-7463 or bethrussell@osu.edu

1. **Institution Code or name of institution (will be translated into confidential institution code)** _____
2. **Which category best describes the department or unit that catalogs special collections materials in your library?**
 - a. ___Cataloging (or equivalent unit) for the entire library/libraries
 - b. ___Subunit or team within Cataloging (or equivalent); solely responsible for special collections
 - c. ___Cataloging unit or team within special collections; administratively reporting to special collections
 - d. ___Other
3. **If “Other” is selected, please describe the department or unit.**
4. **Which category best describes the types of special collections materials cataloged by the department or unit in question 2?**
 - a. ___All special collections material, including digital items
 - b. ___All special collections material in original format (but not digital surrogates)
 - c. ___Special collections material except archives/manuscripts
 - d. ___Rare books only
5. **If the department does NOT catalog all special collections material, please describe**

**other departments” responsibilities for cataloging special collections material
(example: serials cataloging section catalogs serials; archives are not cataloged)**

Approximately how many FTE staff are responsible for special collections cataloging, at each of the following levels? If responsibilities are split between special collections and other types of work, use appropriate numbers (example: less than 1 FTE manager if manager supervises nonbook formats and special collections cataloging.)

6. Administrators/Managers

- ☐ Less than 1 FTE
- ☐ 1 FTE
- ☐ 2-3 FTE
- ☐ More than 3 FTE

7. Professional librarians (with MLS degree)

- ☐ Less than 1 FTE
- ☐ 1 FTE
- ☐ 2-3 FTE
- ☐ 4-5 FTE
- ☐ More than 5 FTE

8. staff (no MLS degree required)

- ☐ Less than 1 FTE
- ☐ 1 FTE
- ☐ 2-3 FTE
- ☐ 4-5 FTE
- ☐ More than 5 FTE

9. Paraprofessional staff

- ☐ Less than 1 FTE
- ☐ 1 FTE
- ☐ 2-3 FTE
- ☐ 4-5 FTE
- ☐ 6-10 FTE

___ More than 10 FTE

10. Graduate students or student assistants

___ Less than 1 FTE

___ 1 FTE

___ 2-3 FTE

___ 4-5 FTE

___ 6-10 FTE

___ More than 10 FTE

11. Volunteers

___ Less than 1 FTE

___ 1 FTE

___ 2-3 FTE

___ More than 3 FTE

12. Others

___ Less than 1 FTE

___ 1 FTE

___ 2-3 FTE

___ More than 3 FTE

13. Approximately what percentage of the total number of cataloging staff in the entire library/libraries does the staff assigned to special collections cataloging represent?

___ Less than one-quarter of total cataloging staff

___ Between one-quarter and one-half of total cataloging staff

___ More than one-half of total cataloging staff

14. Which scenario best describes the way in which material is assigned to a specific cataloger within the department or unit?

___ Catalogers are assigned work based on its format or subject.

___ Catalogers are assigned work based on its language.

___ Catalogers are assigned work based on the provenance of the material

(example: certain catalogers work on specific collections)

___ Catalogers are assigned work based on the existence or completeness of bibliographic records.

___ Some other method is used to assign work.

15. If “other” is selected, please describe the method.

16. To the best of your knowledge, have there been any recent changes in the organizational structure affecting special collections cataloging, or are there plans for any such changes? If so, please describe.

17. In order to keep this survey brief, complicated organizational structures and workflows may have been simplified. If you would like to provide further information about your institution, or comment on the survey itself, please do so below. Please also provide contact information if you would be willing to discuss your comments at greater length.

Thank you for your participation in this survey!

Notes and References

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19. Zoomerang, <http://www.zoomerang.com> (accessed August 22, 2003).
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24. This statement was often heard at ARL's "Exposing Hidden Collections" working conference at the Library of Congress, September 8–9, 2003.